Sylvia Rivera Law Project: Transitioning

This summer, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) provided a growth to my life that I had not anticipated when I was applying for a RRASC internship. As a politics major with no desire to become a politician or go to law school, I initially thought it was pretty risky to place me in a law organization and expect me to thrive. However, I quickly learned that I needed no interest in law or policy as direct career choices to be overwhelmingly concerned with the well-being of trans-identified/gender non-conforming/intersex low income people of color. My work this summer became much more personal than I could have ever anticipated.

The bulk of my work as the Movement Building Team intern at SRLP consisted of constructing this year’s issue of SRLP’s annual newsletter, In Solidarity, communicating with SRLP’s Prisoner Advisory Committee (PAC) members about continuing their activism from behind bars, and attending any work-related functions as an SRLP representative. Of course, I was fortunate enough to experience the occasional nuanced assignments outside of what an intern in my position would normally do, and I am grateful for it all.

In Solidarity is the newsletter that is sent out once a year to SRLP’s PAC members, who are SRLP community members who are currently incarcerated. In Solidarity is about 25 pages long, so it’s quite a production task, which is why only one issue is published per year. The following are just a few of the sections in the newsletter that I was responsible for completing this summer: the introduction letter (which a veteran SRLP member typically writes to open the newsletter, addressing all of PAC); the biographies (made up of the photos and goals of any new members who have joined SRLP in the past year); current events (which would address any stories that the media has covered in the last year pertaining to trans/tgnci issues); self-care (a list
of tips and tricks that PAC members can use while still incarcerated to keep themselves as mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually comforted as humanly possible); and the resource list, which is a page full of the addresses and phone numbers of people and organizations that could be useful to PAC members while they are serving their sentences.

Probably my favorite task for In Solidarity (and in retrospect, actually the most important) was collecting PAC member contributions to the newsletter. Considering that In Solidarity is made for PAC members, the fact that the meat of the publication is actually made by PAC members shouldn’t be surprising. PAC members sent in their creative/artistic expressions all summer to fill the majority of In Solidarity’s pages with. I received beautiful, emotional, painful, hilarious, and ultimately, very profound poems, drawings, narratives, short stories, songs, and letters from PAC members every day this summer, and I was so honored to be the first eyes that saw them and the person responsible for making sure that their very personal pieces made it into the newsletter. In fact, through my contact with PAC members, I made a friend, and we became pen pals. I’ve learned so much about life in NYC during her glory days, and I am happy to report that her release date is October 9th, 2013.

This goes hand-in-hand with In Solidarity, but my involvement with PAC work in general was very significant this summer because most of the PAC members’ cases were handled through the direct services team at SRLP by the attorneys as well as the legal interns. I never assisted in any legal action for any PAC members, but I learned so much by sitting in on brown bags every Friday with the legal interns. Brown bags were 3-hour lectures that the 3 main SRLP attorneys would give alternately about a particular legal topic related to trans issues, such as police brutality or disability justice, and often, it was for the benefit of being better suited to handle PAC and SRLP community cases. It was very similar to being in school, and I absorbed
as much as I possibly could. One instance in particular when I was glad I could have been of assistance in regard to PAC and the direct services team was during a revision made to the Department of Corrections Health Services and Policy Manual 1.31, which relates to Gender Identity Disorder. Since I was not a legal intern, I did not know the specifics of the revision, but I was able to affirm that it was one step closer to bringing better treatment of tgnci folks to prisons in particular. After the revision came through, I was able to help out by making packets of the new policy and other related information to mail out to PAC members. It wasn’t much but I still felt grateful that I could be even a remote part of making sure SRLP members, both in and out of prison, are always aware of their rights.

I have so many favorite moments and experiences from this summer, so it probably wouldn’t mean much to start off this specific account by naming a favorite. Nonetheless, some of the most awe-inspiring moments that I’ve ever had, probably in my life, came from my experiences at work-related functions for SRLP this summer. Talk about star-struck: in only two and a half months, I’ve met (and worked with!) Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, Cecilia Gentili, and Red Durkin – all transwomen who have made (and continue to make) strides for transwomen all over the country, but particularly in New York City. The sole magnitude of simply meeting these women gave me such confidence and such a sense of fulfillment while working with SRLP, that that could have been enough. However, when events like Trans Day of Action and Trans Pride Storytellers Night were next on the SRLP calendar, and my bosses encouraged me to attend, I could not be more grateful that I did. Don’t get me wrong, I was often very intimidated by all these strong, beautiful, self-assured tgnci folks in any given event that I would go to for “work” (because it quickly stopped feeling like work). However, listening to their experiences and their stories (some horrific, many empowering) and witnessing their passion for their
activism and solidarity with other tgncci folks gave me insight that I would never have gained had I not interned at SRLP.

One of the most difficult things about working at SRLP (or any social justice organization, rather) is the tendency for the people involved to become pessimistic and discouraged from continuing to fight, and instead letting those feelings rule their interactions with other people in the movement. My entire team, from the other interns to the staff, was made up of wonderful, beautiful human beings. Unfortunately, the clients did not always contribute to the safe space that SRLP staff did its very best to create; we had a woman set a fire in the elevator and assault one of our attorneys, and another scream at the top of her lungs for an hour and end the fit by threatening my bosses. However, what’s most painful about all of this is the fact that outside factors – discrimination, profiling, prejudice, ignorance – are often partly responsible for the angst and hostility that clients like these enter the SRLP office with. What touches me most about SRLP is that it is an organization made up of folks who recognize that truth, and do their best to cut that root where it lays before taking these episodes too personally. Safety is of course the most important priority, but SRLP recognizes that when marginalized, targeted people are acting the way marginalized, targeted people are expected to, the root causes, not necessarily the acts themselves, need to be addressed. SRLP knows what time it is, and is not an organization that “saves” people, but works to create a world where no one will be in danger in the first place.

Going into my senior year at Mount Holyoke, the pressing question that everyone has for seniors (“So what are you going to do after graduation??”) is one I still don’t have an answer for. However, since SRLP has been so influential and so inspirational this summer, but also in my life entirely, that I will pursue any and every career aspiration that I have, bearing in mind that
there will always be work to do when there are identities in our own communities left voiceless. I also know that SRLP has confirmed what I already knew, at the very least, about my career aspirations: even if it’s not in terms of the money I make, the work that is going to fulfill me the most, and literally pay me the most, is working on creating spaces for people who previously had none.

Five to seven pages is not nearly enough to account for all of the work that I’ve been blessed to be able to do, all of the friendships I was able to make, and all of the lessons that I have taken away from the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. This report will never do justice to the symbolic transition that I experienced alongside so many of my clients’ physical transitions. However, even though I cannot find adequate enough words to say this, the permanence that SRLP will hold in the rest of my life – because of the person that I’ve become, because of the people that I love, because of the work that I want to define me – is one of the greatest life offerings I could ever have received.